Commitments, speech acts, and common ground

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Despite the fact that there are lots of pragmatic theories in which commitments play a more or less prominent role (e.g., Asher and Lascarides 2008, Lauer 2013, Krifka 2014), I believe there is room for another one. Unlike most accounts that I'm aware of, mine treats commitment not as a property of, but as a relation between, agents. I propose to view commitment as a three-place relation C between two agents a and b and a propositional content φ, and to read $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ as "a is committed to b to act in accordance with φ." $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ entails neither that φ is true nor that a or b believe φ to be true. Commitment is a normative notion: if $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, then a must act in accordance with φ, and b is entitled to act in accordance with the premiss that a will act in accordance with φ.

Commitments enable agents to coordinate their actions; that's what they are for. In the paradigm cases, coordination is required to attain a common goal, but the notion of coordination as such does not presuppose a common goal. If Fred tells Wilma that he will do the dishes, his promise to her enables them to coordinate their actions: Fred is now committed to do the dishes, and by the same token, Wilma is now entitled to plan her activities on the assumption that Fred will do the dishes. But none of this implies that doing the dishes was a common goal when Fred made his promise, nor need it become a common goal as a result of Fred making his promise.

If $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ and it is a's goal that φ be true, then a's commitment is telic; otherwise it is doxastic (cf., e.g., Walton and Krabbe 1995). Assertions engender doxastic commitments; most other speech acts engender telic commitments. The distinction is an important one, but it bears emphasising that, whether telic or doxastic, commitments always act as self-imposed constraints on our future activities, which enable others to coordinate their actions with ours.

My working hypothesis is that every speech act engenders a commitment $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, where a is the speaker and b is the addressee. Commissives engender telic commitments that require the *speaker* to make φ true; directives engender telic commitments that require the *addressee* to make φ true. For example, if Wilma asks Fred to do the dishes, she thereby becomes committed to the goal that Fred do the dishes. As usual, questions may be analysed as directives. If Betty asks Barney, "Are you gay?", for example, she thereby becomes committed to the goal that Barney commit himself either to being gay or to not being gay.

Assertions, too, give rise to commitments of the form $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, but in this case none of the constraints that characterise commissives and directives need apply. Suppose Wilma tells Fred: "I'm pregnant." Then φ is a possible state of affairs in the present, but nonetheless Wilma's speech act constrains her *future* actions: she is now committed to act in accordance with the premiss that she is pregnant, and Fred is now entitled to do the same.

If a makes a speech act that engenders the commitment $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, then ceteris paribus b will share a's commitment: $C_{b,a}(\varphi)$. In many cases, sharing will be signalled ("Sure", "Right", …), but it also may be merely implied or taken for granted. Note that, if $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ is telic, $C_{b,a}(\varphi)$ need not be telic. If Fred promises Wilma to do the dishes, for example, and she agrees to share his commitment, then in the first instance this just means that she commits herself to act in accordance with the premiss that Fred will do the dishes.

Whereas commitment sharing is optional, a commitment must be acknowledged for it to be a commitment:

Acknowledgment: $C_{a,b}(\varphi) \models C_{b,a}(C_{a,b}(\varphi))$

If an utterance is ignored or rejected, or goes unheard, then it fails to engender a commitment. In many cases, acknowledgments will be signalled ("Hmm", "Okay", ...), but they also may be merely implied or taken for granted. Assuming that acknowledgment is a prerequisite for commitment, shared commitment entails joint commitment (and vice versa):

Joint commitment: $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ and $C_{b,a}(\varphi)$ and $C_{a,b}(C_{b,a}(\varphi))$ and $C_{b,a}(C_{a,b}(\varphi))$ and ...

Joint commitment is closely related to common (or mutual) belief, but it is not the same. In particular, unlike common belief, joint commitment doesn't entail belief for either party (though belief may be an implicature, as we will presently see), and it is more general than common belief, since the notion of commitment encompasses doxastic as well as telic attitudes.

Thus far, we have ignored the possibility that $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ while $a = b$. However, there is nothing in the foregoing discussion to rule out that possibility. Let's say that $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ is a private commitment iff $a = b$, and that $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ is a social commitment if $a \neq b$. Private commitments are commitments to oneself, and they serve the same purpose as social commitments, i.e. action coordination. If you commit yourself *to* yourself to do the dishes, you impose a constraint on your own future actions, viz. that you will do the dishes, which is bound to affect your plans. Private telic commitments are intentions in the sense of Bratman (1987); private doxastic commitments are beliefs (or, at least, belief-like attitudes).

Assuming that acknowledgment is a blanket prerequisite for commitment, it follows that private commitment entails what is known as "positive introspection", which comes out as a special case of joint commitment:

Positive introspection: If $C_{a,a}(\varphi)$, then $C_{a,a}(C_{a,a}(\varphi))$ and $C_{a,a}(C_{a,a}(C_{a,a}(\varphi)))$ and ...

Private commitments play the key role in my analysis of self talk (Geurts 2016). If Fred tells himself, "I'll do the dishes now", for example, he thereby becomes committed to himself to doing the dishes, or in other words, he thereby forms the intention to do the dishes. And private commitments are useful in other ways as well. For example, they enable us to generalise Grice's Quality maxim along the following lines:

Generalised Quality: Don't make a commitment to another unless you make the same commitment to yourself. More succinctly: if $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, then $C_{a,a}(\varphi)$.

This predicts, for example, that Fred's promise to do the dishes may implicate that he intends to do the dishes; that Betty's assertion that Napoleon was gay may implicate that she believes that Napoleon was gay; and so on.

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